



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: October 17, 2019

Agenda Item: Antelope Coulee Conservation Easement, Region 7

Action Needed: Final Approval

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: FWP proposes to purchase a conservation easement on 9,706 acres of deeded land in Treasure County near Hysham. The property consists of over 8,000 acres of sagebrush grasslands and over 1,000 acres of river-bottom land along 7 miles of the Yellowstone River. The upland portion of the ranch includes yearlong habitat for antelope, mule deer, and sage-grouse, while the river-bottom portion includes riparian and wetland habitat for pheasants, wild turkeys, white-tailed deer, and waterfowl.

The easement would add to existing conservation efforts in the area including Isaac Homestead Wildlife Management Area (WMA), Amelia Island WMA, and approximately 50,000 acres of 30-year grassland lease agreements. The easement would preclude the conversion of native ground, limit development, institute grazing standards, and offer managed public access opportunities in perpetuity. An independent appraisal that is pending a final review, valued the easement at \$3,439,000. Wildlife Restoration Federal Aid Program (Pittman Robertson) would fund up to 75 percent of the cost with Habitat Montana covering the remainder.

Public Involvement Process & Results: Public scoping was conducted from 2/16/18 to 3/16/2018. Two comments supporting the easement were received during the scoping process. The draft EA was released to the public on 8/28/2019, and a public hearing was held in Hysham on 9/12/2019. The comment period concluded 9/26/2019. Fourteen comments were received through the public comment period. Eight comments supported, one opposed, and five comments were neutral. Responses to the comments were addressed in the subsequent Decision Notice that was released on 10/2/2019.

Alternatives & Analysis:

Proposed Action: To purchase a conservation easement on high-priority wildlife habitat that assures habitat functions and public recreational access while retaining in private ownership.

No Action: FWP would forgo the opportunity to conserve and enhance valuable wildlife habitats. There would be no guarantee of maintained habitat functions or public access.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends approval of this proposal to conserve and enhance wildlife habitat and public recreation opportunities on this land.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission approve the Antelope Coulee Conservation Easement as presented.